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## St Joseph's Church: A Testimony to Irish Labor

St Joseph's Church pictured in the *Illustrated Review of Northeast Connecticut* (1891)



The elaborate ceremony which accompanied the laying of the cornerstone of Willimantic's "new Irish Church," St. Joseph's, in August, 1873, was recorded for posterity by the *Willimantic Journal*. The report recalled that "twenty destitute foreigners" arrived in Willimantic in the summer of 1847, to work for the Windham Manufacturing Company. They created as much interest in town as a visit from Queen Victoria would have. Twenty six years later, Willimantic's Irish population, the destitute foreigners, built a magnificent edifice in town.

The twenty Irish immigrants were made up of three families, the Crowleys, Maxwells and O'Neills. Their numbers were swelled a couple of years later, as Irish laborers and their families

settled in Willimantic during the building of the New London Railroad. Willimantic's population in 1847 was primarily Protestant Yankee. The Willimantic Yankees were horrified that Catholics were now in their midst, and a long difficult period of struggle and accommodation began.

The Irish performed their first mass in secret in March, 1848, in the basement of a private house on Main Street. It was conducted by Father Brady from Middletown. Later that year, Brady acquired a tract of land on Jackson Street. Brady also officiated at the first public Catholic services, conducted in the fall of 1849 in Franklin Hall on Main Street. He shared the duties with another Irish priest, Father McCabe from Danielsonville.

McCabe wrote that these early ceremonies were met with "exhibitions of bigotry." On several occasions, McCabe and the worshipers were locked out of the hall. He was forced to conduct open air services in field off Jackson Street. McCabe was almost killed when one of his carriage wheels flew off en route to Baltic from Willimantic. It was discovered that the wheel's nuts and bolts had been loosened.

In 1857, the Catholics purchased the Baptist's abandoned Church and relocated it on their Jackson Street land. They renamed it "St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church." The first resident pastor was Father Hugh J. O'Reilly in 1860, and he was responsible for purchasing a tract of land out of town, and establishing St. Joseph's Cemetery in the same year. O'Reilly was followed by Father Daniel Mullen. On May 11, 1863, Father Florimond De Bruycker arrived from Belgium. He was based in Willimantic, but also conducted Catholic services in Baltic, Stafford and Coventry.

Willimantic's Irish population exploded in the years after the Civil War. They were joined by a large number of French Canadians, seeking employment in the town's textile mills. The small, converted Baptist Church was far too small. Catholic societies throughout eastern Connecticut accumulated funds by organizing fairs, festivals, and picnics. In May, 1872, the old Baptist Church was moved to Valley Street, and work on a new church commenced on the site.

The cornerstone of St. Joseph's was laid with much ceremony on a beautiful summer's day on August 17, 1873. The most reverend and illustrious Francis Patrick McFarland, Bishop of the Diocese of Hartford, solemnly blessed the cornerstone, situated in the North West corner of the church. His address, written in Latin, was deposited beneath the cornerstone with the latest issues of the *Willimantic Journal*, *New York Herald*, *Freeman's Journal*, *New York Catholic Revue*, *Boston Pilot*, and various coins of the United States, Ireland, England, France, Canada and Belgium, and a photograph of Florimond De Bruycker.

The Church was completed the following year. It's beautiful Gothic lines were designed by a well known architect. E. S. Howland. The high altar was constructed in and shipped from Munich, Germany. St. Joseph's was dedicated on November 17, 1874 by the right reverend Bishop McQuade of Rochester. Father De Bruycker was pastor for almost 40 years. He died in December, 1902.

In 1903, the French-Canadians withdrew from St. Joseph's and organized their own parish, St. Mary's. The remaining Irish-Americans were concerned that St. Joseph's would perish because of lack of funds, but the departed French-Canadians were replaced by an influx of Polish and Italian immigrants. In 1920, a local historian noted that 1400 Poles and 400 Italians resided in Willimantic. St. Joseph's remains as a testimony to Irish labor and resolve which built Willimantic into one of the most prosperous cities in industrial Connecticut.